

Firdoze Bulbulia

Race, class and TV preferences

Adolescents in South Africa – four case studies

Case studies of adolescents from South Africa and their relationships with their favourite TV characters show how gender, age and ethnical background play into the selection and reception of TV programmes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, most feminists perceived the biological sex to be the basis for gender construction. However, coloured feminists focussed on racism and colonialism – and view these as tools for understanding gender relations.¹ The identity construction of adolescents in South Africa, their “performing gender” and their relation to the media cannot be understood without the dimensions skin colour and ethnicity. In the ethnographical study, conducted by the IZI in co-operation with the Children & Broadcasting Foundation in Africa (CBFA), we accordingly looked for adolescents from the largest ethnical groups in South Africa: “Black”, “Caucasian”, “Indian” and “Coloured”. These individual cases are not representative; nevertheless they deliver insight into individual identity construction and into the meaning of media in the New South Africa.

Aliyah (female, 15, Indian)

“I am a 15-year-old, Indian, Muslim girl from South Africa. Sometimes it is really easy, sometimes difficult. I have to keep everything in balance.”

Aliyah lives with her mother, her two little sisters and the grandparents in a suburb of Johannesburg. Aliyah’s family is middle class. She wants to become a journalist. On television she



Aliyah (right) and her friend at school

likes to watch news programmes and reports about current affairs, i.e. *Special Assignment* (SABC) and *3rd Degree* (eTV). The presenter Debra Patta from *3rd Degree*, “an intelligent, confident and attractive woman” of colour, is especially important to Aliyah.

In a way, she serves as a role model by showing that it is possible in South Africa – as a woman of colour – to gain importance as a journalist and active producer.

Aliyah also likes TV dramas and sometimes re-enacts scenes from *Backstage*, a South African soap opera based on the US-American soap opera *Fame*, in her room. She enjoys the show because of its strong arts, drama and dance components and because of its relevance to teen issues such as coping with school and balancing a social life, and sometimes the programme deals with such significant issues as racism, and rape. She says:

“How young people cope with their school lives, balancing their school lives

and their social lives, which is something I find a bit of a problem – because trying to integrate everything, when to go out with your friends, what is appropriate behaviour ... I am a Muslim girl so I have to bring my religious life in to the situation – certain things that they do might influence my life ...”

Amongst others, Aliyah finds symbolic material in the soap opera and in the news. Here, it is important that it is a “native” production. Through the South-African protagonists and the locally based topics she gets the feeling to find herself and her problems reflected.

Bongani (male, 14, black)

“We are poor, we are 10 living in one shack, my mother is the only one working. My hobbies are to help people who are suffering – I think I can help them, I will try my best.”

Bongani lives with his mother and 8 other family members in a room in a small hut in the informal settlements. In this tin hut there is neither running water nor a connection to the sewage system. Only the mother has a job, the father left the family. Bongani visits a public school with little financial resources and a dilapidated infrastructure.

He refers to himself as South African, a Christian and as member of the ethnical group Xhosa. For him, this results in a coherent foundation for his spare time interests: he plays soccer and is part of the group “Survivors” that helps to relieve social and humanitarian grievances in the community. Bongani rarely watches TV, since the electrical generator only works at certain times. He likes *YoTV*, a daily in-



Bongani (right) and his best friend Thomas

teractive TV magazine for children and adolescents. Like his friends, he is enthralled by the presenter of the programme, Siphso. He is respectful, confident, “not shy and he can talk to anybody.” Bongani would like to conduct himself in the same way as Siphso.

Another programme Bongani watches regularly (when possible) is the police series *Jozi Streets*². In a sense, he finds his experiences with the daily criminality reflected: “South Africa is o.k., alright, but there is so much crime. The police try to stop it but somehow it gets worse and worse.”

In contrast to South African reality, the violent criminals in *Jozi Streets* always get caught and prosecuted. The protagonists serve as warrantors for the controllability of crime and for the hope for a less violent future.

Neka (female, 15, white)

“I think if I’m true to who I am - if I’m true to myself – then I’ll have no trouble in being accepted. I have no need to put on a mask – although sometimes I think everybody does.”

Neka lives with her parents and her younger brother in a prestigious neighbourhood, where during Apartheid only white citizens were allowed to live. The schools in this area are generously equipped with gymnasiums, sports areas, swimming pools

and science laboratories. Neka is proud of being a South African and of being socially engaged. She has a clubfoot and knows from her early school days how it feels to be excluded. But in the New South Africa also her white skin colour, so she assumes, could lead to racist discrimination in her professional life.

On television, the presenters of *Carte Blanche*, Noeleen of *3talk*, and Oprah Winfrey are especially interesting to Neka:

“I would like to meet Oprah, especially, because her show has convinced me not to drink, not to take drugs and not to get too thin or too fat. She influenced principally all my values and I would like to thank her for that.”

She regularly discusses topics of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* with her mother, with whom she has a very close relationship. Her girl clique doesn’t like this programme very much; they are more interested in boulevard topics, which Neka finds absolutely boring. Neka is an emphatic, socially-aware and intelligent girl seeking a truthful identity without masquerade. In the strong TV presenters she finds role models and moral support.

Jason (male, 15, white)

“It’s a good thing to be part of the Rainbow Nation.”

Jason lives with his parents and one older sister in a suburb just like Neka. Jason is white, Methodist, of French origin and is part of the upper class. Status symbols and material possessions play an important role for him. He says: “I am privileged in many ways and I don’t worry much.”

Jason is able to articulate his TV preferences well: “fun stuff, clothing, basketball movies, and kids and rich fathers who never have any privacy”. Jason finds that in international fiction films, sitcoms and soap operas. His favourite actor is Johnny Depp. Jason likes to watch *Smallville*, the American television series about an adolescent Superman in an American

suburb. He likes the protagonist of the programme because he is a superhero and girls find him attractive: “My sister thinks he’s hot.”

The adolescents, with whom we spent several days, who showed us their world and told us about it, developed a very individual sense of identity. In the media they find what supports them on their way.

Girls, at least in these case studies, look for female role models, boys (with one exception) for male role models. The coloured and black adolescents chose coloured and black media actors whereas at least for Neka it is no problem that Oprah Winfrey is black. Possibly, being in a more privileged position, it is easier to draw on persons with different ethnic backgrounds for identity construction, whereas for Aliyah, being a Muslim of Indian origin, the coloured presenter is very encouraging.

The teenagers’ topics and interests which are strongly connected with their social milieus are paralleled by their television preferences in a way that is quite striking. Bongani who in his environment has to cope with the threat of criminality chooses a programme which deals positively with this. Jason prefers programmes that reflect current scenes and signs of well-established youth. Insofar, colonialism and materialism play a very significant role here. ■

NOTES

¹ Cf. Sardar, Z.; van Loon, B. (2004): *Introducing Cultural Studies*. Cambridge, UK: Icon.

² *Jozi Streets* is a local police series similar to *NYPD Blue*. *Jozi* is a short form for Johannesburg.

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